

Employee Spotlight: Todd Haagenstad

January 31, 2017



Descendant of the masters

On any given Sunday, enthusiasts from Los Alamos and neighboring communities gather at Urban Park to play a recreational sport known as pétanque (French, meaning “feet fixed”). Pronounced “PAY-tonk,” pétanque is deceptively simple to learn and play but strategically complex like chess. Pétanque has been a popular recreational sport worldwide for decades and has recently started growing in popularity here in the United States.

The man responsible for bringing this sport to northern New Mexico and Los Alamos is Todd Haagenstad. About six years ago, Todd learned the sport from his close friend Christophe Descarpentries. Both share a great passion for pétanque.

“We were at a party,” Todd remembers, “and people were gathered to watch the televised Kentucky Derby. I like horses, but neither of us was really much into watching the races, so he convinced me to go into the backyard, where he taught me the basics

of pétanque. It was fun, social, and relaxing—I knew I just had to introduce the sport to my family and others in my community.”

Basic

equipment to play pétanque—the jack, balls, and a measuring device—costs as little as \$30, although competition-level equipment can get quite pricey (\$300 or higher for high-quality balls). The jack is a little smaller than a golf ball, and the hollow metal balls are about the size of an orange.

An overview of the game

Invented in southern France in 1907, pétanque is typically played outdoors, preferably on a hard surface covered with a thin layer of gravel. Games can be between two players or teams of two or three players on each side.

Todd explains the basics of the game: “It starts with one player or team tossing out a target ball, known as a *cochonnet* (French for “piglet”) or a jack. Each player or team then throws larger metal balls toward the jack. Every player’s objective is to get these metal balls, or *boules*, as close to the jack as possible.”

Elements of both strategy and chance influence the sport as players can place boules closest to the jack, knock away another player’s *boules*, or move the jack closer to one of their *boules*. At the end of a match, the *boule* closest to the jack receives a point. Players or teams with consecutive *boules* closest to the jack, can earn multiple points in a match. Matches continue until a player or team earns 13 points to win the game.

“Anyone can learn the sport in less than a minute,” quips Todd. “Mastering the sport—now that’s a different story.”

Pétanque has a strong social draw

Despite being a highly competitive sport with recognized national and international champions, Todd notes that pétanque is at heart a fun, social sport. “I am a big advocate of pétanque being used as a recreational sport,” he says. “Anyone can play—I’ve had tournaments here in town where one team had an eight-year-old girl and an 86-year-old man I’ve had beginners and advanced players intermixed, making for very dynamic games.”

Todd also says that pétanque is an ideal sport for communities in Northern New Mexico. “I grew up in a big family in Ojo Caliente,” he explains. “The mixed cultures of New Mexico are very similar to the cultures found in the various parts of France and throughout Europe. It is pétanque that brings families and communities together—people gather to play the sport, have a glass or two of wine or beer, eat great food, celebrate life together, and enjoy each other’s company. This experience often creates extended pétanque families with friendships that last for years.”

The

average pétanque playing surface is 15 meters by 4 meters. Todd Haagenstad worked with Los Alamos County to build this pétanque surface at Urban Park in Los Alamos.

Pétanque in Los Alamos

In 2010, Todd and Christophe established the La Mesa Pétanque Club, which caters to pétanque enthusiasts from throughout New Mexico. Todd is the club's president, and his brothers Mark, Skip, and Jim (all of whom also work at Los Alamos) are also founding members. La Mesa is a member of The Federation of Pétanque USA, Inc., the official governing board of the sport in the USA. In 2014, Los Alamos County built a pétanque court at Urban Park and the club hosted its first triples tournament in Los Alamos. La Mesa continues to host tournament and outreach events in Los Alamos, Espanola, Albuquerque, and other parts of the state.

During the warmer seasons, Todd and others host weekly mid-day pétanque gatherings at Urban Park for anyone wanting to get out of the office for some fresh air and friendly competition. Equipment is provided and the lessons are free.

One of the fun characteristics of the La Mesa Pétanque Club is that each member has a distinct nickname. Todd earned his nickname while working as a house builder during his college days. During that time, he worked with a carpenter who spoke little English. The carpenter did not like the name "Todd," so instead he started calling him "Toje." The nickname stuck, and Todd has even emblazoned the nickname on his own *boule*.

Pétanque

metal balls typically weigh from 680 to 800 grams. This ball (sitting on top of a typical red jack) belongs to Todd Haagenstad, whose nickname is "Toje."

A Laboratory employee for close to three decades, Todd Haagenstad has worked primarily in the environmental protection and remediation programs. He currently works as an environmental project manager for the Environmental Management Program Office.

Resources

- [La Mesa Pétanque Club on Facebook](#)
- [The Federation of Pétanque USA, Inc.](#)
- [Urban Park Pétanque](#)
- [Pétanque America](#)
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